

# מחברת המנהל

## THE YESHIVA EDUCATOR'S NOTEBOOK

National Conference of Yeshiva Principals

אגוד מנהלי ישיבות

### TOWARD A TAXONOMY OF CHUMASH SKILLS

By Rabbi Aharon Hersh Fried, Ph.D., Dean, Jewish Center for Special Education, Brooklyn, N.Y.

An axiom amongst special educators; one based on commonsense, experience and research, is that if we are to help a child learn we must have a sequential breakdown of the subject matter to be taught. In slightly varying forms this idea has been presented as a "Task Analysis," a "Taxonomy of Educational Objectives" or an "Inventory of Basic Skills." This fundamental notion is based on the idea that learning occurs in a small hierarchy of ordered steps—with the mastery of each skill being a prerequisite to the learning of the next skill in the hierarchy.

Unfortunately for much of Jewish education, we have all too often forgotten this basic truth and skipped over or neglected teaching our students basic material and skills. Sometimes we have engaged in the equally counterproductive practice of rushing our students through the basics without giving them a chance to master them. We have done this in the interest of not getting "bogged down" in the dull (to us) drudgery of basic skills and getting on to the more relevant and more interesting (again to us) *pilpulim*, philosophical discussions, *kushyot* and *terutzim*. We rationalize our approach by claiming that even though the material we spend most of the time teaching is somewhat "above" our students, they will soon "get the hang" of it. Exposure to the material will sharpen their minds—we tell ourselves, forgetting the warning of the *Mahara"l*:

and there are those who remove him (the child) immediately to the study of Gemara . . . and it's not as if he would glean from it even as much as a fox does from a freshly threshed field . . . but rather as much as a fly extracts from sucking marble stone . . . but that a child should gain intellectually from having been fed material which is not fit for him and is not at his level of comprehension—*This is impossible!*

We don't teach students to mastery, in contradiction to the words of *Chaza"l*.

Thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children—(that means to say) that they shall be sharp (fluent) in your mouths, so that if someone asks you something you should not stammer, or hesitate and then answer, but rather answer him immediately.

We don't teach to mastery because that would be boring—forgetting that (a) mastery itself is rewarding to students (children will sing nursery rhymes—1000 times—not understanding a word—what is boring to an adult is not necessarily boring to the child; and (b) that although the material itself may not be intrinsically interesting to the child, we can however motivate the child well with extrinsic rewards as the Rambam writes in his Commentary to *Perek Chelek*:

For a small child who is brought to the teacher to study Torah . . . But according to his young years and the limitations of his mind does not understand the value of that study and therefore perforce the teacher will have to . . . motivate him to learn by using things which are already loved by him at this young age, and the teacher should tell him, read and I will give you walnuts.

So children learn but do not *master*—The *Maharsh"l* in *Sanhedrin* tells us that teaching this way is tantamount to robbing the child of knowledge:

IF SOMEBODY DEPRIVES A STUDENT OF TEACHING HIM EVEN ONE HALACHA IT IS AS IF HE HAD ROBBED HIM: That is to say that the teacher has not taught the student like Rav Preida who taught his student 400 times *until the lesson was fluent upon his lips*.

and a child who has been robbed of knowledge at one level cannot attain higher levels of knowledge—he becomes "learning disabled" as *Chaza"l* tell us

If you see a student whose learning is as hard (as difficult) as iron, it is because his studies are not ordered. Rashi: and he does not remember what it says there . . . for he has spoiled (and is deficient in) his study of Mishna which precedes Gemara

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Furthermore, denied the tremendous ego boost of gaining mastery, the child instead wallows in confusion and misery—there is nothing that he really “knows”—soon he comes to feel “there is nothing he *can* know” and thus arrives at the negative self image which will manifest itself in school in the “unmotivated,” “rebellious,” day-dreaming and yes, often even “disturbed” student.

It is not my intention in this paper to redefine learning disabilities or to identify its etiology. Suffice it to say though, that many of the children whom we see at ages 10-13, suffer not from learning disabilities but from early teaching disabilities.

Teachers of course should not be blamed—they are limited by and subject to externally imposed curricula and pressures from parents and administrators who understand and appreciate quantity better than quality. Teachers of *Limudei Kodesh* are most hampered by the lack of sequentially presented teaching materials.

We present this paper to the teaching profession as a work in progress. A first step towards re-introducing the notions of hierarchical organization (of learning) and MASTERY learning to Jewish education.

## THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

Before we introduce the actual taxonomy though, a few words of introduction and orientation are in order.

In order to arrive at a taxonomy of learning we must first do a task analysis of the subject matter, topic, or concept to be taught. A task-analysis is the breakdown of a subject matter, a topic or a skill to be taught into its component steps, organized in a hierarchical manner. With this in hand, the teacher approaches the lesson with clearly stated teaching objectives organized in a precise order of what comes first, what comes second, third and so on.

Although ideally a task analysis is an objective analysis of learning, the factors taken into account in doing a task analysis will vary with:

- a. **One's definition of Knowledge**—Although we are used to thinking of knowledge in the cognitive sense only, philosophers, psychologists and educators have for generations struggled with the question of “what does it mean to know?” It is not only the ability to assimilate complex cognitive operations which develops as a child grows. Piaget amongst others has pointed to a developmental sequence in which even the very qualitative nature of knowledge follows a developmental sequence going from sensory to cognitive ways of knowing. Thus, the question is: “Do we take into account

only the cognitive aspects of learning, or do we also give recognition to our senses, our hands, our voice, etc.?”

- b. **How one views the subject matter** and what one's goals are for that subject. Thus e.g. is Chumash to be seen as the study of a *text* or as the study of a story and laws, or both?
- c. **How one views the cognitive process of learning**—What kind of skills are basic and precede other skills. Thus, e.g. does the statement of a rule or principle precede the introduction of specific instances which can be derived from it? Or should the specific instances be taught first and the rule arrived at only after the synthesis of the specific instances? Should “habits of thought” be taught, or should we concentrate on fostering “creativity”?

It is our view that

- a. **Learning involves the whole child—not merely his mind**; as *Chaza"l* tell us “If she (the Torah) is enveloped by your 248 (all) limbs, she will stay with you and if not she will not stay with you.”

We often speak of teaching the child “in his own language”. We cite—“teach a child according to his ways”. Yet we rarely sit down to discover for ourselves what that language is. One thing is certain, for the young child it's not “first rehearse his studies and then go back and understand them.” First one must become familiar with the words he is learning. To retain them he should chant them and thus commit them to memory for

he who learns without the sweetness of song, about him it is written ‘and I too have given you laws which are not good’.

In the Mishna and Talmud it is generally specific instances and details which precede the general rule (see *Baba Kama*, Perek 1, Mishna 1, *Baba Metzia*, Perek 1, Mishna 9, and *Gemara* thereon; “it is a general rule which he wants to tell us” for just two examples) This may run counter to what we have come to believe in the past years. It does not however run counter to commonsense or research.

In an excellent little book on the teaching of mathematics, a book with important implications for all of education, Morris Kline has arrived at many of the same conclusions for the teaching of math. Thus he says;

Students should learn to become habitual about the elementary operations with numbers so that they do not have to think about them.

Fundamental principles and logic may be introduced only later for

“Logic does not dictate the contents of mathematics; the uses determine the logical structure. The logical organization is an afterthought and in a real sense is gilt on the lily”

Kline cites Alfred N. Whitehead, the philosopher who has written,

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It is a profoundly erroneous truism, repeated by all copybooks, and by eminent people when they are making speeches, that we should cultivate the habit of thinking of what we are doing. The precise opposite is the case. Civilization advances by extending the number of important operations which we can perform without thinking about them. Operations of thought are like cavalry charges in a battle—they are strictly limited in number, they require fresh horses, and must only be made at decisive moments.

and tells the story of a centipede who was walking alone leisurely when it met a toad.

The toad remarked to the centipede, "isn't it wonderful? You have one hundred feet and yet you know when to use each one". Thereupon the centipede began to think about which foot to use next and was unable to move.

Approaches which skip and sacrifice the experiential-habitual-rote-mastery steps in the learning process in favor of an illusory notion of comprehension often leave the student literally "lost in thought." A child who is taught Chumash and is given a so-called "conceptual" understanding of a story and some vocabulary words and exercises, receives a superficial and general idea of what the Chumash is about, but he leaves each year's work without mastery of the material. It is impossible to build the next year's work on such weak foundations.

It is with these principles in mind that we have approached the task of creating a taxonomy of Chumash skills.

### THE TASK ANALYSIS

This writer has found it useful to conceptualize the task analysis as three separate breakdowns taking into account three different aspects of the task. These are:

- A. *The task components*—Any task or material can be broken into its component steps. Thus, for example, if I want to teach that  $1 + 2 = 3$ , I have first to teach
1. What 1 is
  2. What 2 is
  3. What 3 is
  4. What the plus sign means
  5. What the equivalency sign means, etc.

Each one of these concepts is a step in the task analysis. It is one of the components of the subject matter.

- B. *The mode of presentation*—any single concept or component of a subject can be presented in a number of ways ranging along a continuum from concrete to abstract. Thus, e.g. I could say, "the = sign denotes the lack of difference between the two sides of an equation" or I could say "the = sign means 'the same'" or I could put five apples on one child's desk and five on another child's desk and show that the number of apples on one desk is the same as or = the number of apples on the other desk.

There is research done with perfectly normal adults which shows that people make more errors on math problems when the problems deal with unfamiliar and therefore abstract materials, than they make with the very same mathematical operations which are presented with objects that are familiar to them. Thus  $3X + 4X$  is more difficult than 3 apples + 4 apples.

- C. *The response Mode*—What am I asking the student to do? Repeat what I said? Circle the correct answer? Articulate an answer?

Each of these require different skills. Knowledge is not a unitary concept. Whether I "know" depends upon what level of knowledge you ask of me. A child who "knows" to repeat a Pasuk, may not "know" its meaning and a child who "knows" the meaning of the words may not be able to derive its full implications. Often what a child "knows" depends on what he is asked and how he is expected to respond.

It is with this orientation that the proposed inventory of Chumash skills was compiled. At this point we have confined ourselves to *Chumash* skills only. A full taxonomy would have to include also the skills needed for Rashi. In truth Chumash and Rashi are inseparable. We have borrowed from Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy the division of learning into the areas of 1. knowledge and 2. comprehension, as we recognize that in order to comprehend, one must first know.

We must stress again that what we are presenting is a work-in-progress. In fact it is at this point an inventory more than a taxonomy since often it is not clear to us which steps in the learning process would precede others. We offer it in the hope it will encourage others to work at it, study it, add to it, detract from it and refine it.

We would appreciate receiving comments from others. An inventory is just that. It is not a teaching method. We do have some ideas of how these skills should be taught, but that would be beyond the scope of this paper.

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**Babylonian Talmud**

- Tractate Shabat, 63a
- Tractate Erubin, 54a
- Tractate Taanit, 8a
- Tractate Baba Kama, 2a
- Tractate Kidushin, 30a

**THE TAXONOMY**

**A. KNOWLEDGE**

**I. READINESS SKILLS**

- a. Reading
- b. Reading without being distracted by *ta'amei hamikra*
- c. Able to follow along when *Chumash* is being read with translation (lack of auditory-visual correspondence).
- d. Able to read Pasuk fluently
- e. Able to read Pasuk with translation
- f. Able to repeat Pasuk with translation, aloud, fluently and with confidence

**II. REFERENCE SKILLS**

- a. Differentiate text of Chumash from Text of *Targum, Rashi, and Haftarah* in Chumash-text.
- b. Find beginning of Sedra
- c. Find end of Sedra
- d. Find Posuk No. "X"
- f. Find Posuk and Parsha
- g. Find *Sheni, Shlishi, etc.*
- h. Find name of Parsha by reading top of page
- i. Find name of Sedra by reading first line of Sedra
- j. Know names of five sefarim
- k. Know names of Sedros
- l. Find Sedra when told what sefer it's in
- m. Find Sedra when not told what sefer it's in

**III. VOCABULARY AND MECHANICAL GRAMMAR SKILLS**

- a. Able to (1) recognize (2) recall translation of individual words
- b. Able to (1) recognize (2) recall Hebrew old words in new context
- c. Able to (1) recognize (2) recall Hebrew word when given translation
- d. Able to (1) recognize (2) recall synonyms
- e. Able to (1) recognize (2) recall antonyms
- f. Recognition of words of same root
- g. Able to pick one of two possible translations of a word by contextual cues in Pasuk.
- h. Able to (1) discriminate (2) recall translation and function of prefixes
  - 1. and—*vav hachibur*, and it was—*vav hamehapech*
  - 2. the *Heh hayedi'ah*
  - 3. to
  - 4. from
  - 5. question—*Heh hash'eylah*
  - 6. in
  - 7. that
  - 8. like

- i. Able to (1) discriminate (2) recall translation and function of gender and possessive pronouns
- j. Able to (1) discriminate (2) recall translation and function of suffixes
  - (1) Gender singular and plural suffixes
  - (2) possessive suffixes
  - (3) other suffixes: to

**IV. FLUENCY AND FAMILIARITY WITH CHUMASH**

- a. Able to read and translate Pasuk independently
- b. Able to answer "where else did we have this word"? (in same configuration)
- c. Able to answer "where else did we have this word"? (in different configuration)
- d. Where else did we have this topic?—e.g. Shabbos
- e. Aware of part of Chumash found in Tefillah or elsewhere, e.g. *Kiddush*
- f. Able to answer specific questions about story or topic in Parsha (this doesn't necessarily tie in with knowledge of Pasuk).
- g. Knowledge of Mitzvoths found in each Sedra
- h. Able to fill in correct letter missing to complete spelling of word by
  - 1. recognition
  - 2. recall
- i. Able to spell word by recall
- j. Able to fill in missing word in Pasuk by:
  - 1. recognition
  - 2. recall
- k. Ability to place vowels to the consonants of a word
- l. Ability to place vowels to the consonants of a Pasuk

**B. COMPREHENSION**

**I. GETTING CLEARLY AND EXPLICITLY STATED FACTS AND DETAILS.**

- a. Able to answer "yes" or "no" to statement this Pasuk speaks about ... (gets general and global meaning)
- b. Able to answer factual question directly answered in Pasuk. (In one of 3-5 Psukim, in one of 10 Psukim in one Pasuk in Parsha)
  - 1. Who, what, where
  - 2. When, how, why
  - 3. May we light a fire on Shabbos?
- c. Able to answer questions relating to factual details which are clearly stated in Pasuk
- d. Able to answer questions relating to motives and intent
  - 1. What did he want?
  - 2. Why did he want it?
- e. Cause and effect relationship
- f. Identifying character traits
- g. Evaluation of truthfulness of a statement based on a Pasuk
- h. Evaluation of accuracy of a statement based on a Pasuk

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- i. Evaluation of relevance
  - j. Recognizing different points of view
  - k. Able to identify Mitzva in Pasuk
- II. VOCABULARY AND LANGUAGE
- a. Can identify Adjectives
  - b. Can identify adverbs
  - c. Recognizing affect in words
  - d. Understand words in multiple meanings
  - e. Understand idiomatic expressions
  - f. Understand metaphor
  - g. Rhetorical questions.
- III. (FUNCTIONAL) ANALYSES OF TEXT
- a. Able to tell "which words in Pasuk tell us . . .
    - 1. That someone is speaking
    - 2. That someone did or is doing something
    - 3. Who is doing
    - 4. What is being done
    - 5. Where it's being done
    - 6. How it is being done
    - 7. Why something is being done
    - 8. To what is something being done
  - b. 1. Able to identify beginning of quote
  - 2. Able to identify end of quote
  - 3. Able to find quote within a quote
  - c. Able to divide Pasuk into distinct phrases
    - 1. How many things is Pasuk telling us.
  - d. Able to answer questions regarding sequence of events
    - 1. which words in Pasuk tell us what happened *after* "x"
    - 2. which words in Pasuk tell us what happened *before* "x"
  - e. Able to answer questions regarding cause and effect
    - 1. which words in Pasuk tell us what happened as a result of . . .
  - f. Pick out main words in Pasuk—drop adjectives and adverbs
  - g. Find seemingly "superfluous" words in Pasuk
  - h. Rewrite Pasuk in linear fashion
    - i. Rhetorical question
- IV. DERIVING FACTS NOT EXPLICITLY STATED IN PASUK
- a. Who, what, where
    - 1. When it's stated earlier
    - 2. When it's not stated
  - b. How, why, when
  - c. Sequence of events
  - d. Main idea in one Pasuk
    - In 3-5 Pasukim, In Parsha, In sedra
  - e. Cause and effect relationships
  - f. Identifying character traits and motives
  - g. Evaluation of relevancy
  - h. Evaluation of truth of a statement based on a Pasuk.
    - i. Evaluation of accuracy
    - j. Recognizing different points of view

## V. ORGANIZATIONAL AND ANALYTICAL SKILLS

- a. Able to organize Parsha into its component parts—to achieve overview of Parsha
- b. Able to organize Sedra into its component parts—to achieve overview of Sedra
- c. Can relate Pasuk to its place in context of Parsha
- d. Can relate Parsha in context of Sedra
- e. Can relate Parsha or Sedra in context of five books of Chumash

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## HEED THE HIDDEN MEANINGS IN WHAT YOUR BOARD SAYS

Reprinted from *The Executive Educator*, November 1983, pp. 10, 12.

Exasperating, humorous, true: What school board members say to you sometimes, is not *exactly* what they mean. Cracking what seems to be a code of stock phrases is a challenging task, but with the right attitude, you'll find it's not an insurmountable one. To help you recognize the hidden meanings of key phrases, here are some interpretations from a veteran administrator—William F. Urbanek, superintendent of the Maquoketa (Iowa) Community Schools. Urbanek's clues:

When a board member says, "*I think the board needs more information on this,*" it means someone doesn't like your proposal. You might consider backing off, especially if there is board consensus on "needing more information."

When a board member says, "*We want a full report on this unfortunate incident,*" watch out. This means, "We're ticked off, and we want someone's scalp." Will it be yours or someone else's?

When a board member confides, "*I hear Victor Loser from Strong Valley is looking for a principal's job; I think you should take a hard look at him when you interview candidates for the position we have open,*" this is a tip that Victor is the board member's nephew, his wife's nephew, or his boss's nephew. Better do some careful screening (read: stalling) and hope some other uncle gets Vic a job.

When the same board member remarks, "*From the complaints I hear, our school's selection and hiring process needs a good overhaul,*" he plainly is peeved. And he's serving notice that (considering that you didn't hire Victor) you'd better take the next "good" advice you get—if it isn't too late for you already.

When the board president declares, "*We would like to have a firm recommendation from the*

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*superintendent on this item,*" you know it's a hot potato. The Board wants to be sure it has a scapegoat.

When a board member says, "*I don't understand this recommendation,*" he really means, "You blew it! You gave the wrong recommendation. You are what the board wants."

When the board tells you, "*We'd like to see the other alternatives to your recommendation,*" it means, once again, that you blew it. You gave the wrong recommendation. All is not lost, however. This statement also means, "*But, we're giving you a second chance, you lucky stiff. Make certain you interpret things correctly this time.*"

When the board president says, "Our board has made it a policy never to give a superintendent a multiyear contract," this is a clue that the board never has had a superintendent it trusted. Alternative interpretation: This is a spur-of-the-moment policy, because the board doesn't trust you, either.

When a board member says, "*I've received a lot of telephone calls on this issue,*" it means he's received one or two calls.

When he says, "*I've received an unprecedented number of phone calls on this issue,*" it means he's received three calls.

Finally, remember those statements from your formal evaluation by the board? Here's how they should be interpreted:

"*You are a good financial leader, but you need to watch curriculum more closely.*" Board members clearly didn't like the heat they took over that sex education class you authorized.

"*You are a good curriculum leader, but you need to watch the finances more closely.*" Hey, big spender: You blew too much money on that convention and other travel expenses.

"*You seem to be having some staff problems.*" Word somehow has circulated that the teachers don't like you.

"*You seem to be having some problems with the classified staff.*" Now, the custodians don't like you.

"*Your public relations efforts are weak.*" Bad move: You didn't bend the rules to do a favor for a board member's spouse, son, friend, or the mayor.

"*You are a good educator, but your spouse is a detriment to you.*" Uh oh. Your spouse apparently has offended some board member's spouse, son, friend, or the mayor.

"*You are a good educator, but your family is a definite handicap. Your kids have been in too much trouble.*" Interpreting this one is easy. You're in trouble. The board is saying, "Anyone who can't run his family can't run a school system."

## HOW TO LOSE A GOOD TEACHER —FAST! (A Program for Parents)

by Reb Reuven Rogers, Menahel  
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*Editor's Note:* The formula for this program was worked out, over a period of years, by the parent body of the Wild and Wooly Hebrew Day School in Elbow Grease, Montana. The results of the program, to the great chagrin of Reb Reuven Rogers, *menahel*, have been reflected in chronic teacher recruitment and retention difficulties. This, despite the attractions of tree-lined boulevards and frequent rodeos, for which Elbow Grease is famous the world over.

1. Over-react to children's apprehensions regarding the first few days of school—new teachers, new classes, new building, new books, new approaches and expectations.
2. Don't give teachers a chance to get to know their classes and children.
3. Teach the teachers how to do their job.
4. Tell the teachers that they are going to have a difficult time with the parents, since many of them are educators by profession.
5. Speak disparagingly about teachers in the presence of children.
6. Always assume your children are right before you have a chance to hear the teacher's presentation.
7. Let the teachers know that you are a very important parent in this school.
8. Assume that your children's teachers will be unresponsive unless pressured by the school administration, your spouse, or significant others. Always come on strong.
9. Emphasize the negative.
10. Most important, stop teachers when you happen to see them in the supermarket, in shul, or at social occasions, for a "quick conference" regarding some involved aspect of your children's academic adjustment.

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